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UNCLAS MANILA 000249

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR PRM/MESTETSKY, EAP/K, AND EAP/PMBS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES IN THE PHILIPPINES

REF: 04 STATE 275820

1. (U) North Koreans have access to the same international protection offered other refugee groups in the Philippines. The Philippines is the only country in Southeast Asia to have signed the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and to have an institutionalized regime of refugee protection. The Department of Justice has a dedicated office (the Refugee Processing Unit) focused on refugee issues.

2. (U) Post has had no experience with North Korean asylum seekers or refugees. However, standard procedures are in place to handle potential cases. There are no special security challenges to handling North Koreans, and sufficient policy and press guidance exists for this eventuality.

3. (SBU) In informal January 11 discussions, Department of Foreign Affairs' Director for Northeast Asia Ms. Manina Rueca told Poloff that she personally would welcome USG-funded humanitarian assistance for North Koreans in the Philippines, calling such an initiative a "humanitarian gesture." However, she reacted coolly to the idea of a US refugee resettlement program for North Koreans in the Philippines, calling it "very sensitive." She cautioned that any potential program would require extensive discussion and consultation.

4. (SBU) Rico Salcedo, the officer in charge of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Manila, told PolOff separately that the Refugee Processing Unit, to which the UNHCR provided technical support and served as an advisor, operated efficiently in adjudicating refugee claims. Salcedo noted that the GRP's approach to refugees was "humanitarian." North Korean asylum seekers would get favorable treatment, he stated.

5. (SBU) Salcedo observed that the Department of Foreign Affairs had quietly instituted an agreement with the South Korean government to facilitate the transit of North Korean refugees from third countries to South Korea. The volume of transits had increased significantly during the last two years, reaching nearly 500 refugees annually, traveling in groups as large as 60 people.

6. (SBU) South Korean Political Counselor Kwon Sae-young noted to A/DCM and PolOff January 14 that all of the North Koreans transiting the Philippines to Seoul originated from China, some of them apparently long-time residents of the PRC. (Note: Kwon bristled at the use of the word "refugees," insisting instead that they be called "displaced persons." End note.) Kwon said his government appreciated the Philippines' low-key and helpful approach to this issue. He insisted that none actually entered Manila; they all only transited the Manila airport using travel documents provided by the South Korean Embassy in Beijing. He added that there had never been an incident of a North Korean attempting to gain access to the South Korean Embassy here.  
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